

WALKER'S MACHIAVELLI

LEO STRAUSS

The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli, Translated from the Italian with an Introduction and Notes by Leslie J. Walker, S. J. Yale University Press, 1950. 2 vols. 585 & 390 pp. \$15.00.

Walker prefaces his translation of the *Discorsi* with a long introduction in which he sets forth his interpretation as well as his criticism of Machiavelli's views. He regards it as possible that Machiavelli was "the most influential of writers on politics that the world has thus far seen" (6). He is certain that Machiavelli's originality consists partly, if not primarily, in the discovery of a new method (80-82). The purpose of the new method is to discover "empirical laws" which express relations "between causes and effects, *i.e.* between human actions and their consequences, harmful and beneficial" (2, 63, 69). Accordingly, the new method leads up to "generalizations and maxims" which "are always teleological": ends are presupposed. This does not mean that Machiavelli presupposes, *i.e.* accepts, any ends: he advises politicians "what to do in order to realize their aims, be they what they may." "He advises all and sundry because he desires to convince his readers that his new method is universal in its applicability" (72-73, 69, 118). This amounts to saying that Machiavelli's new method is not merely a part of his epoch-making achievement but its core. The method which Machiavelli invented is "the inductive method." Machiavelli used it long before Bacon "philosophized" about it (92). That method as practiced by Machiavelli consists in proving a general proposition regarding causes and desirable or undesirable effects by reference to a judicious "collection of examples all bearing on the same point" (85, 82-83). "The standpoint which is basic to this method" is then "the standpoint of expediency" as distinguished from "the standpoint of morality" (8).

Walker feels that his contention regarding the novelty of Machiavelli's method is in need of proof. He asserts that "the practice of considering negative instances was far more

extensively used by St. Thomas Aquinas than it was by Machiavelli, who is but a tyro in this respect." "But neither St. Thomas nor any other mediaeval thinker . . . [proves his] theorems by citing similar instances taken from ancient and contemporary history," to say nothing of other differences between their procedure and that of Machiavelli (84). Walker admits that "there are . . . similarities in method, some of them quite striking," between Machiavelli and Aristotle. But "there are also marked differences." "Aristotle's *Politics* contains at least as many, if not more, precepts or maxims than the *Discourses* of Machiavelli, but rarely does Aristotle cite even a single historical example to show that in practice they would work, whereas Machiavelli invariably cites several . . ." Furthermore, Machiavelli's method, in contradistinction to Aristotle's, is "essentially historical." It was "to his reading of ancient historians," and apparently not to his study of Aristotle, that "Machiavelli's interest in history and his realization of its significance to the politician was undoubtedly due" (86-89). It would then seem that the new method emerged by virtue of a synthesis between Aristotle's political philosophy and "history," *i.e.* coherent records of past events.

Walker does not set forth very clearly what he understands by "the standpoint of expediency." When he speaks of Machiavelli's method, he gives the impression that, from the standpoint of expediency, one considers the suitability of means to any presupposed ends, without being able or willing to distinguish between good and bad ends. But in other places Walker admits that, at least in the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli does distinguish between good and bad ends (119). In accordance with this strand of his interpretation, Walker disagrees with those who hold that "what Machiavelli calls *virtù* . . . is technique pure and simple": *virtù* has normally the same meaning as *virtus* in Livy and connotes in particular "devotion to the common good." Yet "there are difficulties and also some exceptions." Severus, Cesare Borgia and Agathocles are described by Machiavelli as "virtuous," although in these cases "devotion to the common good is definitely excluded" or at least "not relevant" (100-102). The meaning of "expediency" would then seem to remain obscure. However this may be, it is perfectly clear that according to Machiavelli "in the sphere

of politics" certainly "a good end justifies what is morally wrong" (120-121, 103).

Especially interesting is what Walker has to say about Machiavelli's attitude towards religion. He admits that Machiavelli had a greater admiration for the religion of the Romans than for Christianity, nay, that he was "an out-and-out pagan" or that his "writings are thoroughly pagan from start to finish." Yet he also says in the same context that Machiavelli did not reject "any" Christian doctrine. He speaks of Machiavelli's "frank recognition in *Principe*, Ch. 11 ["Of ecclesiastical principalities"] that providence watches not merely over the Church but over the temporal estates of the Pope." Accordingly, he sees "no reason to suppose that his paganism ever led him to repudiate the Church in his heart of hearts" (117; cf. 3, 7). Walker attaches decisive importance to *Principe*, Ch. 11. It is in the light of this chapter that he understands the passages in which Machiavelli speaks about fortune and its "purposiveness": Fortuna is God. Machiavelli "has been frequently accused of being an atheist, but I find no evidence of atheism either in the *Discourses* or in *The Prince*." In support of his contention he quotes this statement of Burckhardt about the humanists: "They easily got the name of atheists if they showed themselves indifferent to religion and spoke freely against the Church; but not one of them ever professed, or *dared to profess*, a formal, philosophical atheism" (78-80; my italics). From all this one could easily derive the following suspicion: in order to know what Machiavelli thought about the truth of religion, one need only know whether the teaching of the *Principe* concerning ecclesiastical principalities was meant seriously or jocularly.

Walker is very far from approving all that Machiavelli says in the *Discorsi*. He begins "by stating plainly" that he rejects "the famous principle that the end justifies the means" "root and branch, and regards it, together with its corollaries, as most pernicious" (2). Yet he believes that it is only fair to criticize Machiavelli, not "from the standpoint of morality," but "from the standpoint of expediency" "because he himself appeals to expediency and it is the only criterion which his method allows him to use" (8). More than that: the novel

question which Machiavelli addresses to political things — the question regarding the consequences, as distinguished from the moral worth, of political conduct and political institutions, or the question regarding the political consequences of moral conduct — “is extremely interesting and of the utmost importance.” The criticism of Machiavelli should therefore limit itself to an examination of his answer, that answer being that moral conduct sometimes leads to political ruin (84, 104). Accordingly Walker tries to prove that immoral conduct never leads to political advantage (104-114).

Walker is not the first to contend that Machiavelli's achievement consists chiefly or exclusively in the discovery of a new method. In fact, it would appear that the view about Machiavelli which predominates today is a vague compromise between the view which Walker adopts and the historicist interpretation of Machiavelli's thought which Walker rejects. At any rate, these two interpretations — the interpretation of Machiavelli as a “scientist” and the historicist interpretation — constitute today the most massive obstacles to an understanding of his thought. Walker himself writes that “Machiavelli says expressly very little” about method (135). On the basis of the evidence adduced by Walker, it would be more accurate to say that Machiavelli says nothing about method. The only passage quoted by Walker which might be thought to refer to a new method is a statement in the Preface to Book I of the *Discorsi* which our translator renders as follows: “I have decided to enter upon a new way; as yet untrodden by any one else,” and which he interprets to mean “a new way and a new method” (82). But the “way” which Machiavelli has decided to take is as little a “method” as was the way on which Columbus embarked in search of unknown seas and lands. Machiavelli set out to discover, not “new ways and methods,” as Walker translates, but *modi ed ordini nuovi*. *Modus et ordo* is the Latin translation of Aristotle's *taxis* (cf. Thomas on *Politics*, 1289a2-6, liber IV., lectio I). Machiavelli then sets out to discover, not a new method of studying political things, but new political “arrangements” in regard to both structures and policies. Walker will perhaps urge the irrelevancy of Machiavelli's saying nothing or next to nothing about his method, and the novelty of his method, on the

ground that Machiavelli was not a philosopher (93). I have no legitimate means of knowing what Walker understands by a philosopher. But he will certainly admit that Machiavelli was a man who must be assumed to have known what he was doing.

But is it not true that Machiavelli, in contradistinction to Aristotle in particular, invariably cites several examples in order to show the result of adopting or not adopting the institutions or policies which he recommends? The way, as yet untrodden by anyone else, upon which Machiavelli enters, leads to the discovery that the institutions and policies of classical antiquity can be and ought to be imitated by modern man: the purpose of the *Discorsi* as a whole is to liberate men from the error of believing that the institutions and policies of classical antiquity cannot be imitated and ought not to be imitated by modern man. Accordingly, Machiavelli is compelled to show in each case that a given institution or policy of the ancients was good (and therefore ought to be imitated), that its modern equivalent is bad, and that sometimes a modern state or individual did act as the ancients did (and therefore that the ancient practice can be imitated by modern man). Machiavelli does not prove these three points explicitly in every case by citing at least one example for each, one of the reasons being that he was not a pedant. At any rate, he is forced to "cite invariably several examples," not because he deviates from the ancients, and especially from Aristotle, but because he is forced to combat a prejudice which did not hamper the ancients. Furthermore, Machiavelli states explicitly that the discovery of new modes and orders (even if they are only relatively new) is "dangerous" (*Discorsi*, I, beginning). It is less dangerous to state novel teachings by telling stories — and citing examples means telling stories — which instruct silently, than by stating them in the form of "maxims or generalizations." One must therefore investigate whether the examples cited by Machiavelli do not convey something beyond the maxim which they are said to prove.

In *Discorsi* III, 18, Machiavelli discusses the difficulty of understanding the enemy's "present and near" actions. He cites four examples. All of them deal with cases where errors in recognizing the enemy's "present and near" actions

were committed. There is a strict parallelism of the examples. twice an ancient example is followed by a modern example. The two last examples deal explicitly with "victories." The ancient "victory" had this character: there had been a drawn battle between the Romans and the Aequi; each army believed that its enemy had won, and each therefore marched home; by accident a Roman centurion learned from certain wounded Aequi that the Aequi had abandoned their camp; he therefore sacked the camp of the Aequi and returned to Rome as a victor. The modern "victory" had this character: an army of the Florentines and an army of the Venetians had been facing one another for several days, neither daring to attack the other; since both armies began to suffer from lack of necessities, each decided to retire; by accident the Florentine captains learned from a woman who, "secure on account of her age and her poverty," wished to see some of her relatives in the Florentine camp, that the Venetians had retired; they therefore changed their plans and wrote to Florence that they had repelled the enemy and won the war. In the ancient example we find a bloody battle, wounded enemy soldiers, and the plundering of the enemy camp. In the modern example, we find a phony battle, an old and poor woman, and a boastful letter. It might be true that, concerning the difference between ancients and moderns in respect of *virtù*, these examples teach little that is new. But it is of some importance for the understanding of the *Discorsi* to realize that the spirit of comedy, not to say of levity, is not altogether absent from this work whose subject matter would seem to allow of nothing but gravity.

In *Discorsi* III, 48, Machiavelli notes "that the general of an army ought not to rely on an obvious mistake which an enemy is seen to make, for it will *always* be a fraud, since it is not reasonable that men should so lack caution" (Walker's translation; my italics). Immediately after having noted this allegedly universal rule, he cites an example in which an enemy made an obvious mistake without any tincture of fraud. This example forces the reader to reformulate Machiavelli's explicit "generalization or maxim" and to wonder why Machiavelli, while speaking of manifest blunders, himself commits a manifest blunder. For if we must read "between the

lines" of Machiavelli's *History of Florence*, as Walker does not hesitate to say (17), it is barely possible that we may have to read "between the lines" of the *Discorsi* as well.

Walker does not give a single valid reason for doubting that Machiavelli's method is identical with the method of Aristotle. By observing that Machiavelli cites examples "invariably" and Aristotle only rarely, one does not prove that Aristotle did not reach his "generalizations and maxims" by starting from examples: the *Politics* all but opens with the expression "we see." Besides, "Machiavelli's interest in history and his realization of its significance to the politician" is in perfect accord with Aristotle's precept and example. When speaking of the ancient historians, Walker mentions Xenophon — rightly in that Xenophon is the author whom Machiavelli quotes more frequently in the *Discorsi* than any other (with the obvious exception of Livy); but wrongly in that Machiavelli quotes only the *Hiero* and the *Education of Cyrus*, i.e. writings which Machiavelli knew to be not historical (cf. *Discorsi* II, 13). It is also necessary to take issue with Walker's assertion that Machiavelli, in contradistinction to Thomas Aquinas, was "but a tyro" as regards "the practice of considering negative instances." *Discorsi* II, 12 proves sufficiently that Machiavelli had mastered perfectly the art of scholastic disputation and that he could have written the whole work in the form of *quaestiones disputatae* if he had desired to do so. This is not to deny that the chapter in question is a parody of scholastic disputations: the central "authority" for the superior view are "poetic fables."

As regards Machiavelli's view of morality and religion, I must confine myself here to two remarks. It is misleading to say, as Walker does, that *virtù* "has normally no ethical significance" (100), since "normally" is not clearly defined, and might very likely be understood to mean a statistical average. It is much better to say that Machiavelli sometimes understands by *virtù* what everyone understands by "virtue," i.e. moral virtue; that he sometimes understands by *virtù* merely political virtue, the virtue of the citizen, of the statesman or of the public-spirited founder; and that he sometimes understands by *virtù* merely manliness and shrewdness combined ("virtue" as Callicles understood it). In a word, *virtù* is for

Machiavelli a term of deliberate ambiguity: Machiavelli cannot criticize moral virtue (*i.e.* its inherent claim to be the norm of political life) except by reminding the reader of moral virtue. He first criticizes moral virtue in the name of political virtue, and thereafter he criticizes political virtue in the name of "Calliclean" virtue. Since political virtue is closer to the root, to "Calliclean" virtue, than is moral virtue, it has *verità effettuale*: "political virtue" designates the sum of habits which are required for maintaining a free and glorious society. Only if one has realized the precarious character of political virtue, *i.e.* the "unnatural" character of a free society, can one devise the proper means for establishing and preserving a free society and the virtue belonging to it. Therefore, one must first descend from political virtue to Calliclean virtue, which may be said to be the only virtue that is natural. Machiavelli replaces "the standpoint of morality" by what is very inadequately called "the standpoint of expediency," not because he is thrilled by the promises of a new method, but because he believes he has discovered that the generally accepted view of morality arises through the oblivion of the social function of morality: men falsely, but necessarily, understand as categorically and universally valid certain rules of conduct which are valid (*i.e.* reasonable) only conditionally and in most cases (*cf.* Marsilius, *Defensor Pacis* II c. 12 sect. 7-8). Walker believes he has detected a contradiction in what Machiavelli says about religion. "*In Discorsi* I, 11 he cynically remarks that people, who were neither ignorant nor rude, were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he had conversed with God, though no one had ever seen him do anything out of the common. This on the principles laid down earlier in the chapter should be accounted a virtue, but in Savonarola it is apparently a fault" (18-19). The difficulty disappears immediately if one contrasts Savonarola's attitude toward divine guidance with the attitude of Papirius (*ibid.*, I, 14).

Perhaps the least defensible part of Walker's Introduction is his attempt to refute Machiavelli's view from "the standpoint of expediency." I must limit myself to the discussion of one or two characteristic examples. Machiavelli "recommends that in a conquered province a ruler should emulate Philip II of Macedon and 'make everything new', *i.e.* be utterly

and unrestrainedly ruthless in eradicating opposition." To this Walker objects, "What of Machiavelli's basic and thoroughly sound principle that no government can be secure unless it has the good will of the governed?" I fear that Machiavelli would not regard this as a solid objection. He would probably make the following counter objections. A government does not have to fear the ill will of the dead. A ruler does not lose the goodwill of his subjects if he enriches them at the expense of foreigners and possibly by enslaving or eradicating those foreigners. Machiavelli holds the view that a government cannot be secure unless it has the good will of "the governed," *i.e.* of the many; but sometimes the many do not mind if the few are eradicated. Eventually Walker grants everything that Machiavelli maintains: "Philip's success was by no means *wholly* due to the brutality which he *sometimes* displayed." For Machiavelli never meant more than just this: that "a broad-minded statesmanship" which is the indispensable condition of success, can "sometimes" not dispense with "brutality" (124-125; my italics).

Machiavelli recommends "killing the sons of Brutus," *i.e.* "murdering anyone who constitutes a potential danger to a newly established regime." To this Walker objects that, according to Machiavelli himself, "it is impossible to establish a new regime by methods, however brutal, if the people are against it." Walker himself says "if": "the people" are not invariably opposed to brutal methods if those are applied to the few or to foreigners. "...the excessively harsh treatment of political opponents in Florence usually provoked a reaction in favor of the old regime." Machiavelli does not suggest that one should use the strongest medicine "usually," but only on the rare occasions when it is likely to lead to success. "Hence for his examples Machiavelli has to rely on the remote past, yet even in the remote past the use of such methods was by no means always successful." Machiavelli does not claim that it was always successful. Walker "would almost think" that Machiavelli "has lost his sense of perspective and seems to prefer the methods of barbarism to those of his own more civilized age" (112). I wonder whether, by making a distinction between barbarism and civilization, Walker does not abandon the standpoint of expediency.

If Machiavelli, the originator of a "most pernicious" teaching, was perhaps "the most influential of writers on politics that the world has thus far seen," and if "the world" has not been merely the spectator of Machiavelli's influence, "the world" is susceptible to the influence of Machiavelli. "The world" can be corrupted by Machiavelli because it is, in a sense, "corrupt" or carries within itself the seeds of its corruption. If Machiavelli has been as influential as Walker says that he has been, "the world" would seem to be a good place for the judicious practice of wickedness, or for a way of life which "uses" virtue most of the time and has recourse to vice only in rare, if decisive, moments. And in fact, all moralists who are worth their salt have always felt that pure, intransigent justice is the road to the hemlock, the cross, and the stake, rather than to advantage in this world. "The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the law's delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes," which drove Hamlet to despair, do not appear to have occasioned much concern in Walker. Otherwise, I believe, he would not have entertained the notion that the road of "expediency" always leads to intransigent justice.

As for the translation, Walker has "endeavored to make it as literal as possible" (162). I regret to say that he has not been quite successful. His translation cannot be said to be superior to that of Detmold. The most valuable part of Walker's work are the references to Livy in the Notes, and the Index of the authors mentioned or quoted in the *Discorsi*.

The University of Chicago.